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ENTRANCE LITERATURE AND THE ANCIENT CLASSICS

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This paper is not concerned with the general question of the study of the classics, but with one special aspect of the matter—the relation of such study to entrance English. The outcry against Greek and Latin has, of course, resulted in a neglect of those languages, and, what is worse still, in a feeling of indifference toward the great influence these ancient civilizations have exerted upon English literature. The political and social history of Greece and Rome, their religion, philosophy, literature, and plastic art, have hitherto been diligently studied by thoughtful citizens, in Europe and in America, with results profoundly formative. Now, in our country, arises a great protest against this “glorification of the past.” Parents and teachers say, “Let us have studies which are practical and modern; studies that result in efficiency. Let America be free and independent, unshackled by allegiance to dead languages and dead authors.” It is in response to pleas such as these that the interests and achievements of the present day are being magnified disproportionately.

Can we afford to do this? Can we ignore the past in its relation to literature and other arts? Surely no one can read English masterpieces intelligently unless he has some knowledge of the classical traditions which have been an inheritance for centuries. Even those who scorn the *pastists* will admit that clarity of idea is always a prerequisite of intellectual efficiency. How can our young people have a real understanding and appreciation of English literature if they are not taught to recognize and identify those classical influences? No clamoring for “practical” subjects can take away from English and American literature those inherent traits which are derived from the classics and are imperishably rooted. Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare, Bacon, Milton, Dryden,

Pope, Addison, Johnson, Burke, Gray, Goldsmith, Keats, Shelley, Byron, Tennyson, Arnold, Browning, Mrs. Browning, Macaulay, and dozens of other authors have drawn themes and plots, as well as indefinable inspiration in matters of spirit and style, from the classics.

It is not a fatuous admiration for the classics that should be taught to our young people, but, rather, a temperate, appreciative recognition of the fact that these dead-and-gone peoples have exerted a great influence upon English literature, helping to form and develop English ideals of art and of conduct. Circumstances in America have combined to make our problem rather difficult. It seems to the American boy a preposterous thing that he, the child of freedom and material prosperity, should be forced to study the history and art of the ancestors of ditch-diggers, shoe-blacks, and confectioners, and it needs very determined efforts to make him realize how, in the revolutions of human destiny, nations of supreme importance have fallen into tragic decline. The hesitating instinct of unimaginative youth must be made to dwell upon the greatness of the art and the literature of the past, so that a whole new world full of beauty and of high ideals can be revealed to them. To train the taste, to kindle the imagination, to develop the appreciation of human history, there is nothing more "practical" than the study of the ancient classics, for there it is possible to get a just perspective.

In connection with entrance English there are three aspects of the classical to be emphasized. First and most obvious is the matter of classical allusions which appear so frequently in the works by English authors, less frequently in American writers. No student can read English literature without meeting these allusions repeatedly, so it is a necessary conclusion that students should be made to memorize the most important of them. The teachers of English literature will agree that there are many strange gaps in the information possessed by those who enter college. Recently, in a course in Chaucer, I tested some students, who were reading the *Book of the Duchess*, by asking them to write down in a few words what they knew about Orpheus, Penelope, Pan, Jason, Cassandra, and Lavinia. Almost every paper betrayed ignorance.

Orpheus was called "the god of sleep," "the god of flowers," "the god of music"; Penelope was "the queen of the lower world," "one of the muses"; Pan was "a fairy," "a wood-nymph"; Jason was "a seven-headed monster"; Cassandra was "a goddess." In one section of thirty-one students not a girl remembered who Lavinia was. Such instances could easily be multiplied.

Do preparatory schools train boys and girls to appreciate, first of all, the "human interest" in these old myths and tales, to feel enthusiasm for old, far-off things? Orpheus, for instance, is mentioned in *L'Allegro*, *Il Penseroso*, *Lycidas*, and *The Merchant of Venice*, yet what does the average student make out of these references? "Orpheus was the god of flowers." It is easy to see how "heaped Elysian flowers" have been transferred. "Orpheus was the god of music." Here the student reveals the fact that no emphasis has been placed upon the mortal nature of Orpheus, who despite his high and gracious powers of music was subject to the will of the deity, and was forced to relinquish his Eurydice at the mandate of a god. The everlasting question of the subjection of human wills to the divine is not beyond the comprehension of high-school pupils. Furthermore, the lonely grief of Orpheus has echoed in the ears of Greek, Latin, Italian, and English poets. Ought not our young folk to know something of the survivals of this story? Is there not time enough for them to read in translation Ovid's version and then Mr. Hunt's rendering of the Middle-English poem where out of sheer pity the romancer retold the tale with a happy ending? Photographs of the grave-relief of Orpheus and Eurydice, in Naples, are easily accessible and would give a new sense of the story's beauty.

Jason may seem a seven-headed monster to those who toil over *The Merchant of Venice*, yet even Bassanio did not think so harshly of his rivals when he called them "many Jasons." The average student fails to appreciate the significance of this allusion, and has little feeling for the romantic sailing of the "Argo," the quest of the Golden Fleece, the winning of the sorceress, and the other exciting details of the life of that adventurer, Jason. Parallels between ancient mythology and modern life may easily be suggested to give the boy or the girl an impulse toward vitalizing antique story.

What explorer matches Odysseus, what aviator antedates Daedalus? Classical mythology is not lacking in sprightly incident, nor in character portrayal, nor in any of the devices of the best sellers of today; and to some readers the vitality of the old stories is far greater than that of our popular fiction. The *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, the *Aeneid*, parts of the *Metamorphoses*, *Prometheus Bound*, *Antigone*, *Electra* compare favorably with the stories in the magazines which our young people read. Be it art or ideals or even behavior that is to be considered, the old books keep their supremacy, introducing us to a world of high endeavor. Every graduate of a secondary school should have vivid associations to be evoked by the mention of the heroes, the demigods and the divinities of ancient times. Studies of these personages will help pupils to define their standards of ethics, and will enlarge their judgments.

Surely the teacher of English should test his pupils in these subjects and should endeavor to add that illumination which comes from imaginative contemplation. Many a lesson can be taught through the example of Keats, whose brooding over the perfection of the Elgin marbles and whose reading of Chapman's *Homer* revealed to him dim figures and Attic shapes invested with beautiful significances. If Chaucer and Spenser and Shakespeare and Milton found joy in re-creating these ancient folk, may not our young people find some measure of interest and enthusiasm for old conceptions of life? Vitality of imagination—the power of re-creation—is wonderfully stimulated by this sort of study, and no one will really question the value of the exercise of these powers. For general culture, for clear understanding of ideas, for the development of the appreciation of old faiths and symbolisms, our young Americans should be made “to touch the Happy Isles” and see not only great Achilles but other shadows of immortal fame.

The second point for consideration is this: Ought not students to have some knowledge about the authors of Greece and of Rome? Suppose the list were limited to the following names: Homer, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Plato, Theocritus, Vergil, Horace, and Ovid. It will be found that the average pupil cannot tell in what country each of these writers lived, nor what the nationality of each is. The most notable instance is Vergil. Evidently not

enough is done to make this poet a real personality to his readers. When college students take up the reading of Dante in connection with Milton or with Chaucer they are always perplexed by the presence of Vergil as a guide to the Italian poet, for they have little recognition of the fact that Vergil was well-nigh worshiped all the way down the Middle Ages. Furthermore, students are usually rather uncertain as to whether Vergil lived before or after Christ, yet if they knew the honor accorded to Vergil as a foreteller of Christ's coming they would never forget the date. An hour spent in giving pupils the main facts about Vergil's vogue in the Middle Ages, his position as a necromancer, and his fame as a poet would be a profitable investment. As regards the matter of his literary relationships, there are certain things that are absolutely indispensable if Milton, for instance, is to be read rightly. Vergil's debt to Homer and his debt to Theocritus should be made clear. Too often, enthusiasts lead young people to think that Vergil knew no master, whereas he was the bland and genial imitator before he was the pattern for poets.

As regards Vergil's relation to Theocritus, surely something should be suggested to students of today, who know so little about the pastoral. Corydon and Thyrsis at their savory dinner arouse no envy and no interest among the sophisticated consumers of ice-cream soda, yet there have been, since the days of Theocritus and Vergil, innumerable readers who have felt deeply the appeal of these vivid and gracious pastorals. The beauty of association which Milton meant to evoke in "O Fountain Arethuse" was an echo of Sicilian song, suggestive of murmuring pines, of clear springs, and of warm, elemental feeling. Appreciation of the Golden Age should be, in some measure, the inheritance of English readers, and it is the teacher's duty to reveal it.

Turning to another quotation, consider what high-school pupils associate with this passage:

Presenting Thebes, or Pelops' line,
Or the Tale of Troy divine.

"'Thebes, etc.,' subjects of Athenian tragedy," is the annotation in a recent standard edition. Surely it is not only necessary but wise to spend several appointments on these lines, explaining to

pupils who the Greek dramatists were, which ones wrote on these subjects, what the *motives* of the tragedies were, concluding with some remarks on the structure and presentation of the Greek play, which caused it to be called

gorgeous Tragedy
In sceptred pall.

The very hearts of Oedipus and of Antigone could be revealed to readers who are old enough to feel the power and mystery of these plays when made to read them even in translation. The tale of Troy, as Milton thought of it, was a story kept alive in various forms, dramatic and epic, all the way down the Middle Ages. Latin authors, Boccaccio, Chaucer, Gower, Lydgate, Shakespeare had retold it from various points of view, and to Milton it was as commanding as the Arthur story is today. Without undue emphasis upon names it would be possible for teachers to give their pupils some conception of the literary history alluded to in these lines.

Ovid's influence upon English literature needs no special comment, for his *Metamorphoses* was the sourcebook from which myths and legends were drawn during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Our classical dictionaries derive a large part of their material from Ovid's work.

Horace, the writer of odes and of satires, should be something more than a name to these young people. How much of the satire in Steele, in Addison, and in Pope is the result of familiarity with Horace? How can the odes of Keats be studied unless pupils are taught something of the history of the ode and are led to see the relationships of Horatian, Pindaric, and irregular English odes?

In the third place, students should be taught more definitely the importance of the Renaissance in England as a manifestation of classical influences. There can be no proper study of Shakespeare and of Milton without recognition of the profound effects of the Revival of Learning upon both of these poets. For example, classes studying *A Midsummer-Night's Dream* lose half the significance of the play if they are not made aware of its relation to the great movement of that day—the rebirth of classical learning under conditions of great intellectual aspiration. Shakespeare's response

to the stimulus of classicism is to be noted constantly. The setting is classical in intention; the chief characters, Theseus, Duke of Athens, Hippolyta, Queen of the Amazons, are survivors of classical story; allusions to Phebe, Cupid, Venus, Apollo, Daphne, and other pagan divinities are frequently met in the text, and the play of *Pyramus and Thisbe* is probably based upon Ovid's version in *The Metamorphoses*. All these indications there are of Shakespeare's concern with things classical, but, like a true child of the Renaissance, he mingled pagan with Christian, Greek with Elizabethan. Anachronisms are frequent, and for the young student there is most excellent training to be won in pointing out the instances where the imagination of Shakespeare combined manners and ideals that were at least two thousand years apart. Such a line as—

For aye to be in shady cloister mew'd,

is an example of the fashion in which the poet disregarded time by making the classical priestess become a nun in a mediaeval cloister, where she was kept in bounds as if a falcon in a mediaeval mews. Another delightful illustration of the audacity of the Renaissance poet is his placing of the mythical Greek figure, Theseus, in juxtaposition with Puck, a being associated with English folklore of Shakespeare's own day. Finally, the humor of the play lies in the satire of the pompous pretense of artisans who sought to follow the fashion of classical revival, but, through blundering ignorance, did violence to themes of "noble note" and travestied devoted love.

The case of Milton must come up once more. Normal boys and girls are frankly in revolt over *L'Allegro*, *Il Penseroso*, and *Lycidas*, and there are signs that these poems will vanish from the required reading. It seems a pity that such a fate should befall work which preserves great beauty, allied with defects which are due wholly to the influence of the Renaissance. The benefits to be gained by studying these poems cannot be overemphasized, yet through sheer bigotry teacher after teacher is surrendering to the demand for up-to-date literature. Teachers are seldom frank with their pupils when discussing Milton. There is no reason for keeping up the pretense that every word of Milton is fine and poetic. Much of the prejudice against him could be removed if teachers

would admit that Milton was eagerly following a literary fashion and made many mistakes in taste because of his devotion to the classical ideals of expression. Many a boy learns a distaste and a suspicion of literature through being taught that the invocations in Milton's *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso* are beautiful pieces of art. A saner criticism will point out the imitativeness, the mixed figures, and the pedantic pompousness of such introductions to pieces of nature-description, and will explain how Milton betrayed his 'prentice hand. If young people are set to distinguish the natural and sincere touches from the artificial in these works, a great deal can be accomplished toward forming a just standard of literary criticism. To show how a young poet's native gift was hampered by convention is to stimulate a pupil's power of judgment. Undoubtedly there are too many classical allusions in these minor poems; a reader must have a rich background before he can appreciate the significance of many lines; but in spite of all their difficulties the poems are immortal character-sketches of two types of mind, and they are full of delicate perceptions expressed with the art of a Renaissance poet who loved nature and books.

The Augustan Age in English literature is, of course, merely pseudo-classical, yet if *The Rape of the Lock* is on the list of suggested reading a teacher must point out the relations of this work to the classics, showing pupils the design of the mock epic, and initiating them into the matters of style and manner where the classical is travestied. A survey of Pope's life must lead to emphatic assertions regarding his obligations to Horace and his boasted familiarity with Homer, whom he knew chiefly through French intermediaries. Pope and classicism, of a sort, are indivisible. Gray's *Progress of Poesy* is also on the list of reading, and no one can fathom the allusions in the first few stanzas without study regarding classical literature.

What we seem to need is more active co-operation between teachers of English and teachers of the classics, a steady, unanimous effort to arouse in pupils imaginative appreciation and to compel them to memorize certain fundamental facts. We need better textbooks for study of masterpieces. The notes in most books are absurdly meager, vague, and mechanical when they treat of classical

subjects. We must have in schoolrooms more dictionaries, books of travel, photographs, and works of art to stimulate and direct the study of things classical, and we need, most assuredly, teachers of English who are aware of the great significance of classical influence in English literature, and who are constantly striving to show pupils how to read literature aright, with due appreciation of inheritances and influences. The boy who goes out into the noise and tumult of the world needs imaginative power to withstand the materialism that will confront him everywhere. Idealism—release from sordid things and companionship with beauty and truth—is surely to be found in English literature, and the evidence of English poets is most positively in favor of a knowledge of the antique world in which they found joy and inspiration.